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A Study of Baudelaire's Symbols of the Feminine in Les Fleurs du mal

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A Study Of Baudelaire's Symbols Of The Feminine In Les Fleurs Du Mal

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BY

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Abstract

Using French and American feminist theory, I analyze Charles Baudelaire's symbols in Les Fleurs du Mal in an attempt to come to terms with symbolic representations of the female that are at once traditional and transgressive.

By examining the images of solids (statues, jewels, metals), lesbians and woman's hair which appear frequently in Baudelaire's text, I reveal Baudelaire's desire to eliminate a woman's generative power and her association with the procreative cycle of nature. His desire for a preoedipal union with the maternal female becomes evident in his early poems and his poems on the subject of a woman's hair. Because he remains trapped in his acculturated association of woman with nature, his desire leads to fear: a fear of submersion in the maternal resulting in a loss of his masculine identity, and a fear of death as a part of nature's generative cycle.

By discussing significant poems in Les Fleurs du Mal--"To a Woman Passing By," "The Beautiful Ship," "The Jewels," "Beauty," "Metamorphasis of the Vampire," "To She Who Is Too Gay," "Carrion," "Doomed Women," "The Invitation to the Voyage," and "Hair"--I conclude that Baudelaire's intense yearning for a nurturing relationship with his mother becomes a suppressed

incestuous desire for her. Conversely, his unconscious leads him to distance himself from actual women in an effort to idealize them, thereby seeking to escape his own sense of mortality in favor of the immortality--the solid artifice--of aesthetic achievement.

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In 1857, when Charles Baudelaire first published Les Fleurs du Mal [The Flowers of Evil], a prosecution, fed by the press and general public in a self-consciously respectable period, forced Baudelaire and his publisher before a Paris court. Following a newspaper protest against the work, the court condemned six of the poems as harmful to public morality and ordered them to be deleted from the book (Brereton 156). This censoring of Baudelaire's poetry indicates the transgressive nature of the images that he evokes.

Much of Baudelaire's poetry portrays images of love and the erotic, which, for him, involves evil. Because of the emphasis on evil and the criticism against the presumed immorality of the work, critics such as Francois Mauriac have analyzed Baudelaire's poetry in an attempt to determine his position on Catholicism, the religion he allegedly affirmed on his death-bed (Peyre 30). Studies such as these are useful because of the religious references in Baudelaire's work, primarily in the section of Les Fleurs du Mal entitled "Revolt." Guessing at the state of Baudelaire's soul, however, adds little to the understanding of Baudelaire's complete text.

Much more prevalent than the religious imagery is Baudelaire's continued focus on the female. These images have generally been ignored by critics or

examined briefly in contexts that do not require intensive study of the symbols associated with the female. Surprisingly, feminist critics have largely neglected Les Fleurs du Mal, a work full of powerful symbols depicting the female. In fact, the symbols of the female are so prevalent that a feminist reading is an important key to understanding Baudelaire's complete text. His use of the female, in both unusually erotic and seemingly sadistic imagery, generated much of the controversy that first surrounded his publication of Les Fleurs du Mal.

Controversy concerning Baudelaire's poetry has not been limited to his subject matter. Much dissension exists among critics concerning the placement of Baudelaire within a literary movement. Paul Valery defines Baudelaire as a classicist (Peyre 12). Jean Carrere defines Baudelaire as "the greatest innovator amongst the romanticists" (139). Anna Balakian, while admitting that Baudelaire "supplies fuel to Symbolism," feels that his use of the symbol developed "nonchalantly and unwittingly" and denies that his work is a part of the Symbolist Movement (46, 53).

This disagreement is easy to account for through a feminist analysis of Baudelaire's text. His symbols are at once traditional and subversive. He relies on traditional symbolic representations while at the same time conflating the symbolic structures themselves.

Whatever, if any, consensual placement of Baudelaire's work in literary history may eventually emerge, feminist analysis can address the use of symbol in both traditional and subversive contexts, probing the significance of this combination of symbols. In order to understand both the symbols themselves and the way in which these symbols have developed, critical reading strategies must employ both French and American feminist theory. This necessity can best be understood by examining the distinctions between French and American feminism.

American feminist critics generally focus their efforts on "revising the traditional paradigm and restoring the female perspective" (Greene 23). Some American feminist critics become engaged in revisionary readings of the literary canon, while others direct their attention to the recovery of neglected women writers and the development of an alternative canon (Greene 23). At the same time, American feminist critics reexamine male writers in order to illuminate the partiarchal assumptions that are inscribed in their texts.

Though the goals are similar, differences exist between American and French feminist theories. French feminist theorists focus on phallocentrism, the structuring of man as the central reference point of thought, and the assertion of the phallus as the symbol

of sociocultural authority (Greene 80). French feminist criticism examines "the way the text works as a signifying process which inscribes ideology" (Greene 25). Influenced by Derridian deconstruction and Lacanian pyschoanalysis, four major methods have developed since the 1970's (Greene 96).

The two that are most often used are "the deconstruction of magisterial texts and traditions, and the attention to silences, to what is repressed or only obliquely suggested in woman-authored texts" (Greene 96). Because deconstruction aims to dismantle binary oppositions, it exposes the dichotomization of such polarities as culture and nature, reason and passion, and day and night, which are always structured as hierarchial oppositions designed to place man in the privileged position. The second method, reading for silences, is the attempt to uncover the absences, the unspoken, because if language is phallocentric, it is in the silences that we will find the discourse of and relating to the female. Frustration with traditional discourse, the breaking of taboos, and the attempt to portray desires or states of mind which cannot be explained through phallocentric language are all a part of the gaps, displacements, and silences which reveal a rebellion from phallocentrism.

The third method is "the decoding of feminine/semiotic modes of writing" (Greene 96). This

strategy involves the problematic analysis of the attempt to write the feminine, that is, to write out of the libidinal energy and experience of the woman writer. Critics must "feel through" the text responding to aural and tactile stimuli in an attempt to subvert masculinist, objectivity-claiming, phallocentric discourse. This semiotic analysis is closely linked to the fourth method which is a close reading of the politics of style in the work of women and also, arguably, in men's writing (Greene 96). Examining writing for its textual politics is to analyze connections between its figurative language, grammatical and structural patterns, and the underlying theory of femininity in the text.

By examining Baudelaire's work from an American feminist perspective, we can discern his view of the female and elucidate the complex symbolism embedded in that delineation. American feminist theory reveals Baudelaire's adherence to Western culture's traditional symbolic representation of the female as associated with nature and in the dichotomized portrayal as either the dangerous, sexual Eve or as the idealized, virgin Madonna.

A French feminist analysis of Baudelaire's poetry reveals his transgressive use of the symbol, particularly in his early poems and in his poems on the subject of a woman's hair. According to French feminist

theory, this transgressive use of the symbol is indicative of a desire for a preoedipal union with the mother, that is, a desire for the early, intense attachment between mother and child that is characterized by nonsensical words and nonverbal communication before the child learns the phallocentric language. By such an interpretative strategy, Baudelaire's symbols can be considered a form of semiotic discourse (Greene 99-101).

Through the use of both theories, it becomes clear that the recurrent images of metallic solids, lesbians, and women's hair in Les Fleurs du Mal each become symbols for Baudelaire's desire to eliminate a woman's generative power and her association with the procreative power of nature. His desire for a preoedipal union with the female is evident in his early poems and in his poems on the subject of a woman's hair, but, because Baudelaire remains trapped in his acculturated association of woman with nature, his desire results in fear: fear of submersion in the maternal; fear of a loss of his masculine identity; and fear of death as a part of nature's generative cycle.

The women in Baudelaire's text are presented in two opposing ways, both manifestations of the same underlying emotion. On the one hand, women are idealized. They are stripped of their sexuality and viewed as beautiful objects, occasions for poems. On

the other hand, women are dangerous and evil, capable, through their sexuality, of luring men into evil as well as providing illusory, inhuman inspirations as the figure of the muse. Both the idealization of the female and the equation of the female with sin are distancing techniques that allow the poet to avoid encountering the woman. Both of these portrayals reveal an exaggerated fear of the female. As we will see in Baudelaire's treatment of nature, this fear is not limited to the female but encompasses that which the female comes to symbolize as well as the female herself.

The poem "To a Woman Passing By" demonstrates both distancing techniques employed by Baudelaire. In this work, Baudelaire idealizes woman, describing her in terms such as "majestic," "noble" and "statuesque." Her "glance" is said to have the power of "rebirth" for the speaker, who claims he "could have loved" her had they been able to meet(Scarfe 221)[1]. Exactly that impossibility of authentic encounter encourages the speaker to idealize the passing woman. Ironically and paradoxically, impossibility makes the poem possible. Because he cannot meet her, there is nothing to fear. He can safely admire her from a distance without any fear of knowing her as she is in the flesh. Because of his fear, a woman is ideal if she is kept at a distance, in this case, passing by. As Peyre points out, "to imagine her as an equal, talking back to the man,

spurning his idealization and preferring to be known and loved for what she is may be a more arduous enterprise" (Hyslop 37).

The fear of female sexuality also develops into dangerous and evil images. The speaker, "tense as a man out of his wits, drank from her eye." She is said to possess "gentleness which bewitches and that pleasure which destroys." The possession and death that the woman has the power to evoke declare the sinister power that Baudelaire attributes to women. Consequently, woman as herself disappears into either the idealized figure of the muse or the possessive figure of evil.

In his comparative study of Proust and Baudelaire, Francis S. Heck discusses this poem and "the magical charm of the woman, expressed by her look" (19). Though Heck accurately notes the poet's desire to "attain a sphere beyond the geometrical dimensions of space and time," he misinterprets this as a desire for "the one efficacious means of perpetuating the ideal state. . . death" (20). In his analysis of only one poem, Heck misinterprets Baudelaire's ideal. A complete study of Baudelaire's images of the female reveal not his desire for death, but rather, his fear of it. His desire to be "beyond the dimensions of time and space" is Baudelaire's attempt to escape from death, not to enter into it. Further, Heck assumes that "the poet, in the absence of the woman, must create a work of art" (20).

However, as a complete analysis of Baudelaire's symbols reveal, in order to create a work of art, the woman must be absent, or at least distanced. The poet is not "rendered paralzyed and speechless" as Heck would have us believe, but spurred to write the poem. The inspiration springs from a woman who can be a muse because she is "passing."

"The Beautiful Ship" displays an idealization of the female similar to that evident in "To a Woman Passing By" (Scarfe 120). The poet states his purpose in the first two lines

> I want to describe to you, O tender
> enchantress the various beauties which
> adorn your youth.

In the next two lines, Baudelaire combines "womanhood with childhood." The rapid association of womanhood with childhood negates the sexuality that would commonly be linked with womanhood. The poet stresses this inclusion throughout the poem by referring to the woman as a "majestic child." This continued reference to the woman as a child allows Baudelaire to meditate on the woman's physical characteristics in an objectified, nonsexual way. The comparisons in the poem evade sexual connotations. The woman is compared to

> a handsome ship setting out to sea
> with all its canvas spread, and swinging
> away, keeping a gentle, languid, slow
> rhythm.

Her head "sways with many a strange grace." Each of these images is an idealized description. In order for the woman to be idealized, she must first be a nonsexual being.

This neutralization of the woman's sexuality leaves the poem nearly free of the sinister, destructive images associated with the female that frequently occur in Baudelaire's verse. Only three images in the poem fall under that description. The woman's breasts are described as "triumphant." The word triumphant suggests a victory over her potential lovers, but the victory belongs to the speaker, safe now from authentic intimacy. This image is carried forward when her breasts are then described as "provoking shields." The word provoking could be used in an erotic sense, but here it is combined with the word shields. Clearly, the image of the shield is not a sexual one. It is not an image of tenderness, intimacy or love. Instead, the shield commonly connotes battle, coldness and deterrence. The combination of the two words creates an aggressive, even hostile image. The "rosy tips" of the woman's breasts are reduced to ornamentation on the shield.

Certainly this reductive fragmentation which separates the woman's breasts from her body is not meant to be an erotic image, but a description arrived at by an "objective" observer who must dehumanize woman in order to see her. The second negative image begins

Your arms . . . are worthy rivals of
glistening boas.

The woman's embrace is compared with that of a constricting reptile, a symbol of cold-blooded constraint and suffocation. This "embrace" is the only interaction between the male and female within the poem. "Embracing" the woman results in suppression. The third instance of a woman as a sinister image occurs in the eighth stanza, though it is much more tenuous. The poet compares his desire aroused by the woman's "thighs" to "torment obscure" and refers to her thighs as "twin witches." Baudelaire portrays desire as the unwitting submission to a woman's sinister magical power.

Perhaps one of the most obvious examples of Baudelaire's attempt to distance himself from the female is the poem that begins

I give you these lines so that if,
by good fortune, my name reaches the
shores of future times, like a ship
favored by a good north wind (Scarfe 61)

Baudelaire promises to immortalize the "jet eyed . . . angel" with his verse. The poem is filled with symbols of solidity which represent for Baudelaire the immobile, unchanging ideal. The memory of the woman is compared to the sound of a gong, introducing metaphors of metallic, solid imagery. The memory of the woman then becomes a chain from which the reader may "remain

suspended." Within this one stanza, images of woman become metaphorically solid objects. The memory of the girl has moved from the ephemeral sound of the gong (though this is a strong, metallic sound) to the solid chain for the reader to climb. In the third and fourth stanzas, this solidifying of images becomes even more apparent. The woman is described as "a fleeting trace." By the end of the fourth stanza, however, the woman is

> my statue with jet eyes, great angel
> of the bronze brow!

The drastic change is easily accounted for when we realize that the "fleeting trace" is the real woman. The "statue," the "angel of the bronze brow," is the woman as she appears in Baudelaire's verse. This image of woman as immutable object (however beautiful) is that which Baudelaire will pass on to "the shores of future times." For Baudelaire, this artifact is the ideal. In his first description of her, she is described as "fleeting," which suggests her ephemerality, her vicissitude and her mortality. By the last line, she has been solidified. She is quiescent, unchanging and immortal; she no longer represents the actuality of woman.

Throughout Baudelaire's work, the ideal female is represented with symbols of the solid. A particularly good example of this occurs in "Song for Late In The Day" (Howard 64). In this poem, the woman is both

idealized and feared for her power, a consequence of her sexuality. She is worshipped like a "trivial and tantalizing shrine" and is feared for her "wicked sorcery" (11. 7-8, 3). She is continually compared to an enigmatic idol; she is "sphinx-like" (1. 11). This image is typical of Baudelaire's attempt to change the woman into, or at least portray her as, something immortal and unchanging through the use of solid images.

Baudelaire's poem "The Jewels" also relies on images of solidity for its representation of the ideal (Scarfe 41). While this poem was one that the court designated as immoral and though the poem describes an erotic scene, the voice is that of the objective observer as in "The Beautiful Ship." That distancing voice describes the female in a tone that is far from explicit.

He begins by calling the woman "darling," but by the end of the stanza, with the adorning jewels, she is compared to "Moorish slave-women." In the second stanza, the "darling" is not mentioned at all. Here it is the jewels that receive the praise for he

> madly loves those things in which
> sound and light commingle.

It is the "glittering world of metal and stone" that brings about this ecstasy. These solid images of metal and stone are responsible for the speaker's arousal far more than the woman wearing the "sonorous jewelry."

Again, the speaker's yearning for transcendent art stresses his desire for an ideal represented by the metal and stone jewels. Such an obsessive ideal enslaves woman in the denial of her presence once artifact displaces her being.

What we have is a complex intermingling of the two views of the female: that of the idealized beauty, and that of the evil seductress. In stanza three, she is described as "deep and gentle as the sea." She strikes "each dreamy pose" and sits "calm and solitary" on her "crystal throne." The jewels not only cause the speaker's arousal, but also heighten the sense of idealized beauty, making "her arms and legs, her thighs and loins, glistening like oil." In several instances, the woman is literally perceived and described as if she were on a pedestal: "[She] smiled down from her high couch," and his love "rose towards her as to a cliff." The word rose suggests her position above him, both figuratively and literally in this poem; the word cliff, however, portends some vague notion of impending destruction, comprehensible if we read rose as denoting the male's erection. Rather than risk the abyss of actual sexuality, the speaker suppresses woman in favor of his dream of woman, in fear of his desire for her. All of these images work to distance the speaker from the woman in the work.

Intermingled with these images of idealization are more obvious images of the evil seductress. She is compared to a "tame tiger" in her cunning. Her breasts and belly are compared to "evil angels." The imagery of these latter metaphors suggests the evil that Baudelaire perceives to be inherent in the sexuality of the woman.

In Leo Bersani's Freudian reading of "The Jewels" he accurately notes Baudelaire's "panicky effort to reject the . . . desire," but he fails to note the extent to which the jewels are credited for that desire, focusing instead on the fragmentation of the woman as the speaker's gaze passes over each body part, an image that is heightened by the image of the fire which seems to suggest spurting blood at the end of the poem. Bersani locates Baudelaire's "misogyny" in his need to "immobilize" the loved one. While this need for the immobile is obvious, when examined in the context of Baudelaire's other symbols, it cannot be so easily dismissed.

Though the poem "Beauty" contains many similar symbols, beauty is solid and immortal in this work. The distinction is drawn immediately between the beautiful and the "mortals." Beauty is linked to the female from the beginning with the reference to the "breast on which every man has bruised himself in his turn." The power and danger of this female beauty is emphasized throughout the work. Not only is every man "bruised," but also poets will be consumed, lovers will be

enslaved.

Baudelaire's concept of absolute beauty is solid and unchanging; as he says in this poem:

> movement I hate, that disturbs the
> ideal line, and never do I weep, nor
> ever smile.

No emotion or even movement is permitted for his ideal of beauty because emotion and movement locate that beauty in the mortal realm. Clearly, it is the transcendent "eternal light" that Baudelaire wants beauty to reflect and to exude.

A vital insight into Baudelaire's ideal of beauty may be gained by examining "The Ideal" (Scarfe 80). Here he reveals that it is not

> beauties with high laced boots and
> bony fingers like castanets [that] appeal
> to such a heart as [his]

Rather, it is Lady Macbeth or a work of art created by Michelangelo that his "chasm-deep heart is seeking." He prefers women frozen in the immortality of art and literature over the living and breathing mortal women found in the vignettes. These representations of women in art and literature are another version of Baudelaire's solid ideal. They are as unchanging and timeless as the jewels or the sphinx. Clearly, the speaker in Baudelaire's verse is attempting to establish an even greater distance from the female, for here he is

unable even to admire a woman from afar. He seeks only the ideal: an invariable, immutable, depiction of a woman.

Perhaps Baudelaire's most powerful images occur in "Metamorphoses of the Vampire," a work that focuses solely on the destructiveness and evil of a woman's sexuality (Howard 133). Not too surprisingly, this is the only poem in which Baudelaire gives a female a voice. That voice, however, is prefaced by the speaker's description of her as "a snake," and, in the second stanza, she succumbs entirely to the speaker's reflections on his experience with her. At best her voice is the fiction of the speaker. Here in the first stanza, her words are taunting, boasting and brazen. The power she has over males is an evil triumph. She claims that "old men . . . laugh like little boys" because of her (l. 8). She asserts her power to make "Impotent angels" damn themselves (l. 16).

The second stanza shows the reaction and the result of the speaker's sexual encounter with her. He describes the encounter in cannibalistic terms: "When she had sucked the marrow from my bones" (l. 17). The speaker's desire to kiss her could be viewed as an enamoured response to her. The images that follow, however, are so horrific that this desire appears repulsive. The woman becomes as "a slimy wineskin, brimming with pus," symbolizing the disgust the speaker

feels toward the woman. To objectify her, to distance himself, he regards her as a "potent manequin." She appears bloated with his "lifeblood" after the sexual act. The last image of her is as the "wreckage of a skeleton," which stresses the death and destruction brought about by and linked to the woman's sexuality (l. 25). The imagery at the end intensifies the effect with the cold, metallic image of

> a rusty signboard hanging from a
> pole, battered by the wind on winter
> nights (11. 27-28)

As the poem concludes, what began as woman's fictional voice has now been dissipated and displaced by the speaker's revulsion, reducing her voice and her presence (even as a distorting fiction) to a metallic screech. From the stylized seductress who "steeped each word in musk," she has become a tawdry object evoking the freezing wind (l. 40). All of these images of decay, dissipation and death work together to delineate the extremely horrific results the speaker attributes to the female and her sexuality.

"To She Who is Too Gay" is one of Baudelaire's most revealing works when viewed from a feminist perspective (Scarfe 131). This poem was also one of the poems the court demanded be left out of Les Fleurs du Mal. Like "Metamorphoses of the Vampire," the imagery becomes very violent and appears sadistic. If we look closely at the

text, however, we can see that the speaker does not want to hurt the woman as a result of any sexual perversity. In this work, there is a complete identification of the woman with nature and, therefore, with the opposite of Baudelaire's solid, unchanging ideal. This opposition provokes the apparently violent desires displaying the speaker's violent reaction to nature, symbolized by the female.

In the first stanza, the woman is active and attractive. She is identified with nature through two images, the landscape and the winds. The third stanza intensifies this identification with nature through the comparison of the colors in her clothes to "showers" and "a mad ballet-dance of flowers." In the fifth and sixth stanzas, the significance of this identification becomes apparent as a strongly repulsive reaction to nature develops. The sun is said to "sear my breast." The "verdure" of nature makes the speaker feel humiliated. Nature is described as insolent to the point of provoking violence. The "punishment" inflicted on the flower prepares the reader for the desire

> To chastise [the woman's] happy
> flesh, To bruise [her] pardoned
> breast, and open in [her] astonished
> side a wide, deep wound."

Solid images are completely absent.

Nature and the female that is so strongly

identified with nature represent the opposite of Baudelaire's solid ideal. Nature epitomizes change, motion, and mortality. These aspects of nature are emphasized through the words winds, suggesting the ephemeral, and spring, focusing the reader's attention on time, procreation, and sexual desire. Images of movement, such as the passing woman and the dance of flowers, also help to accentuate the opposition to Baudelaire's solid ideal.

Similar images and symbols are dramatized in the poem "Carrion" (Howard 350). Again we see the strong link between Baudelaire's symbols of the mortality of nature and the sexuality of the female. He compares the rotting corpse to "a whore" (l. 5). He blames a female "Nature" for "what she had made" (ll. 11, 12). He sees the corpse as "drawing breath" when the "vermin sank / then bubbled up afresh," which again links death to the procreative urge of the natural world, and, therefore, the procreative power of the woman. Baudelaire leads the reader to that connection by describing the "swollen" body, which faintly suggests the female body in pregnancy, and, subtly, transforms love and birth into the death of love, or, at least the death of the lover.

He reminds his lover that she too will come to "this offence," revealing his association of the female with the mortality of nature (l. 37). He imagines her

"rot[ting] underground" amidst the "kisses" of "the worms" (ll. 43, 45-46). He claims, however, to have "kept the sacred essence" of her (l. 48). Again Baudelaire sets himself against nature, trying to overcome what he sees as the "horrible decay" of life by death, and replaces it with his own attempt at immortality: his verse.

One seeming exception to the dichotomized representation of the female occurs in Baudelaire's poems on the subject of lesbians. Though this is another subject of contention among critics, many of them understate the significance of the symbols surrounding Baudelaire's portrayal of lesbians. The occurrence of such images is far too frequent to neglect. In fact, Les Fleurs du Mal was originally submitted with the title, The Lesbians (Paglia 425). By examining a poem centered on this theme, we can see why lesbians are such a prominent image in Baudelaire's poetry.

"Doomed Women" begins with an erotic scene between two women, "their feet seeking each other's, and their hands drawing more close, feeling sweet langours and agonizing thrill" (Scarfe 18). It is important to note that Baudelaire presents the sexual thrill as "agonizing." He goes on to describe several different types of possible lesbian behavior and to characterize it by what it lacks, the male.

He describes those who have "hearts given to long intimate talks" as "shy girlhood loves." He attempts to partially negate the sexuality of the "loves" by referring to them as "shy girls." He completely negates the sexuality of the "vision-haunted" by comparing them to nuns. Apparently Baudelaire assumes there can be no sexuality for women, no satisfying sexual relationships, without men.

"Others," the poet asserts, "implore you to assuage their shrieking fevers," which assumes an unconquerable, inherent desire for the male. He develops this further by describing the desire to

> unite the sweat of pleasure and the
> tears of pain in the dark wood, on lonely
> nights.

Baudelaire seems to believe that desire for the male is an inherent characteristic of all females, regardless of a woman's sexual preference. This point is made more clear when he refers to lesbians as

> great minds who despise reality,
> seekers after the Infinite, . . .
> poor sisters.

It is true, as Camille Paglia points out, that Baudelaire's lesbians are another example of his "unsexed, metallic" women. Baudelaire attributes this sterility to a conscious choice of the women in their attempt to evade reality and achieve the infinite by

avoiding the male and, therefore, the procreative power within themselves (425-26). He identifies with them because he believes their sexual relationships grow out of the desire to avoid what he believes to be the danger inherent in female sexuality. He idealizes lesbians because they have achieved his ideal: a sexual relationship that remains outside nature's generative cycle of birth and death. Birth cannot result from the sexual relationship between lesbians, so the threat of death seems unconnected to their sexuality. Baudelaire's fascination with lesbians stems not out of sexual libertarianism, but out of his belief that they have resisted their inherent sexual desires for men in an attempt to resist nature and its procreative power. Lesbians, then, symbolize a rebellion against, or freedom from, nature. Thus, their prominence in Baudelaire's poetry is consistent with his other symbols, echoing, as they do, his own fear of nature and sexuality.

Critics have consistently ignored or misinterpreted the relationship between the symbolic representations of the female in Baudelaire's text. While Thomas Van Nortwick does discuss both Baudelaire's linking of love with death, and his fascination with women who devour and destroy men, and even notes his fascination with homosexual women, he does not examine the significance of these themes or any of the links between them. He

sees Baudelaire as "expanding and redefining the boundaries of imaginative art" (76). He does not, however, question the ideology or substance of that art.

Equally as limited are studies which assume Baudelaire's misogyny, such as Kerry Weinberg's comparative study. Like many critics, Weinberg compares another writer's treatment of women with Baudelaire's, this time Eliot's, without actually analyzing that portrayal itself. The final point of Weinberg's study is that both writers are misogynistic; Eliot because he is like Baudelaire, and Baudelaire because he uses the female to epitomize "the boredom, the horror and the glory of human existence" (31). Although Weinberg's study is detailed enough to mention the "intimate connection between a "woman and her accessories," the prevalence of "wavy hair" which becomes "associated with exotic landscapes, [and] oceans" and even Baudelaire's respect for his mother, the comparison to Eliot does not require extended analysis of these images or their connections (33). Consequently, the assumption that the article is based on, Baudelaire's misogyny, is not adequately established.

Janis Pallister's comparative study of Baudelaire and the African writer, Lamine Diakhaté, also assumes the misogynistic characteristics of Baudelaire's verse to be obvious. Pallister discusses Baudelaire's voyage as an "attempt to escape the ravages of time" but she

fails to place this image in the context of the other images relating to the women in his verse (772). Baudelaire's dual misogynistic representations are assumed to be apparent and are, consequently, never established, nor are any exceptions analyzed, or even mentioned.

There are, however, significant exceptions to Baudelaire's dichotomized representation of the female which occur in a few of his early poems in which he symbolically embraces a benevolent nature. By examining these early works, we can reveal Baudelaire's attempt to undercut the established symbolic order. Such experimentation leads Baudelaire to the psychological need for the solid symbols that develop in Les Fleurs du Mal and illuminates the consistency in the use of another prominent image in Baudelaire's text: hair. An analysis of the early works reveals the needs and desires that later are evident in the symbols of Les Fleurs Du Mal.

In the early poem "The Previous Life" (1855), the speaker basks in the memory of a previous union between nature and himself (Scarfe 164). Here there is a complete identification between nature and the speaker, drawing him into "the overwhelming harmonies" amid the "calm voluptuousness" that "was [his] home."

"Exotic Perfume" is another work in which nature is "Blissful," "enchanted" and "languid" (Scarfe 56). It

is through the woman's fragrance that the speaker travels to this "enchanted clime," but it is his soul that mingles with this exotic landscape. As we have seen, Baudelaire continually links nature and the female. His own identification with nature in these poems is, symbolically, an identification with the female. By inserting himself into the symbolic link with nature, he conflates exactly those traditionally negative associations of woman, nature and mortality that later become predominant in his text Les Fleurs du Mal.

According to Julia Kristeva, transgressions like these of the established symbolic order constitute a form of political resistance that would be "censored or harshly redirected by paternal (social) discourse" (Greene 86). This break from the traditional symbolic representation becomes a rebellion from the "law of the father" or "paternal discourse" and is instead an example of the "rhythmic free play [Kristeva] associates with mother-infant communication" (Greene 80). More specifically, Baudelaire's desire for the union with nature evident in these early poems, can be read as a desire for the preoedipal union with the mother. Because Baudelaire is refusing to identify with paternal authority, and is instead identifying with the female symbolized by nature, he is revealing a desire to maintain the infantile fusion with his mother.

This theory corresponds exactly to what we know of Baudelaire's biography.[2] Critics have made much of Baudelaire's relationship with his mother. Martin Turnell notes that there was "something which was not completely innocent in the relationship between mother and son." He claims that it is "impossible to separate Baudelaire from his mother" and even blames her for having come between "the poet and his work" (41). Joseph Bennett attributes Baudelaire's fascination with "entrancing colors, smells, and sounds" to his association of these images with his mother's "rustling crinolines, her silks, her jewels, her furs, her perfumes" (1).

Evidence in his journals and letters establish an unusually close and perhaps abnormally obsessive relationship with her. The tone in his correspondence with his mother ranges from adoring, "As for your visits, they make me the happiest man in the world," (66) through reproachful, "I really think you have never been aware of my sensitiveness" (118) and "after reading [your letter] I became inexpressibly agitated," (89) to apologetic, "I know how I have wronged you," and "all the same I beg you to think of my agitation and forego your scolding" (88). Because Baudelaire's entire journal is repleat with attacks on female sexuality, intelligence, spirituality, and even existence, the "heroine of his heart" who unites both "contempt and

love" is apparently the one woman whom Baudelaire could admit to loving, his mother. Baudelaire recognizes her part in his development and work: "Had she been less criminal my ideal had been less complete" (114).

The prominence of the mother is evident in Les Fleurs du Mal as well as in biographical analysis. As we have seen, Baudelaire's early poems reflect an identification with the maternal, while his later symbolic representations in Les Fleurs du Mal reveal his intense desire to distance himself from the female and his desire for her.

According to Nancy Chodorow, in societies which are male-dominated but have relatively father-absent families "masculinity and sexual difference issues become intertwined with separation-individuation issues almost from the beginning of a boy's life" (106). Therefore, the son may develop "feelings of dependence, overwhelming attachment, and merging with the mother . . . that he feels he must overcome in order to attain independence and a masculine self-identification" (106).

In a patriarchal society, women are made extremely aware that they are "of a different gender from [their] sons" (Chodorow 107). Deprived of supportive and physical adult contact, a woman "may push her son out of his preoedipal relationship to her into an oedipally toned relationship defined by its sexuality and gender

distinction" (107). Consequently, the boy's innocence is maintained as delusion in his maturation. Baudelaire, in short, could recognize the delusion but fails to reconcile the desire.

This sexual undercurrent, as well as Baudelaire's identification with the female, is perhaps most evident in the poem "The Invitation to the Voyage" (1855) which begins with the suggestion of an incestuous relationship. The woman is referred to in the first line as both "My child, [and] my sister" (Scarfe 107). The speaker desires a life with the woman in the "land which is the image of [her]," revealing both the link between woman and nature and the desire to identify himself with nature. The speaker imagines a return to the "whisper in secret" of his own "mother-tongue," which is a clear desire for the return to what Julia Kristeva calls semiotic discourse, that is, the "mother-infant communication" (Greene 80). Baudelaire undercuts the categorical division of nature and culture when he portrays a harmony between "furniture," "canals" and "the entire city" of culture, and the "flowers," the "westerning suns" and "fields" of nature. Though nature is generative and associated with time in the images of flowers, fields and the sun in the west, it is not feared, but responsible for the "warm glowing" that the earth "falls asleep in." Clearly, the speaker's union with this maternal nature is not only responsible for

the "harmony and beauty, luxury, tranquillity, and delight," but also provokes the fear that later is so prevalent in Baudelaire's text.

A union with the maternal of this intensity results in the desire to distance himself from the maternal and female in order to attain independence and "a masculine self-identification" (Chodorow 106). The desire for distance necessitates the solid symbol, making the female sterile, immutable, and free of her sexuality. Therefore, she cannot use her sexuality to lure the poet back into his union with her. In Les Fleurs du Mal, the desire for distance and the fear of sexuality dominate the symbols.

Similar benevolent portrayals of nature occur in Les Fleurs du Mal, with one essential difference: the pleasure and even ecstasy of a union with nature is almost always evoked by a woman's hair.

The poem "Hair" is the obvious example (Scarfe 57). The woman's hair is responsible for the speaker's ecstasy because of the "faraway world" that survives in it. This "world" contains an exotic, vibrant, ripe nature which offers itself to the speaker's soul in "waves of perfume, sound and colour." The speaker will "plunge [his] head, never weary of its rapture" into the woman's hair for the "infinite lullaby" he hears there.

In "A Hemisphere in a Woman's Hair" the speaker will "dip [his] whole face in [a woman's hair]" and

"shake it in [his] hands" (Scarfe 59). Her hair contains "enchanting climes" which are "redolent with the smell of fruits and leaves." The landscape is fertile and tranquil as in Baudelaire's early poems. There is no fear or desire for distance because nature is controlled, or contained "in a woman's hair." The speaker is free to "float away on perfume" and enjoy the sexual experience of fondling and smelling the hair.

Baudelaire's ability to achieve this ecstasy and symbolic union with the female, as well as the frequency of the image of hair, constitutes a fetish. There are over fifty references to a woman's hair in Les Fleurs du Mal, and several poems focus on that subject. In each example, the speaker is touching, fondling and smelling hair to achieve gratification. The symbols Baudelaire combines and associates with this image are always positive.

Hair is one of the most common fetishistic objects. The use of it to achieve sexual excitation and gratification commonly involves fondling, tasting and smelling (Coleman 463). The speaker engages in each of these acts in order to achieve "ecstasy." According to Chodorow, fetishes serve to deny the existence of the mother's different genitalia. This denial becomes necessary when "[the son's] own sense of body identity isn't firm. Being presented with different genitalia, therefore, he feels threatened and potentially castrated

himself. It results from "boundary confusion and lack of self firmly distinguished from the mother" (107). By locating his desire in a woman's hair, Baudelaire is, in effect, denying the existence of female genitalia and is, subsequently, eliminating the danger of the generative cycle he associates with female sexuality.

This fetish, evident through the focus on the woman's hair, is merely another distancing technique similar to the solid symbol. Because Baudelaire achieves sexual gratification from a woman's hair, the relationship remains sterile and, therefore, less threatening. A sexual relationship focused on a woman's hair is Baudelaire's equivalent to the lesbian relationships that he finds so fascinating. His hair fetish is an attempt at a sexual relationship outside of nature's generative cycle. No birth; no death. Only Baudelaire engaged in safe, sterile, sexual fantasy.

As we have seen throughout Baudelaire's text, he seeks to distance himself from the female by portraying her as either an idealized beauty, or an evil seductress. To further distance her, the solid symbols develop, making the female unchanging and void of her sexual power. An examination of Baudelaire's early work reveals that he developed an unusually close and sexually-toned relationship with his mother.[3] This relationship created identity conflicts which plagued his sexual relationships and their symbolic

representations in his poetry. His experimental breaks in the traditional symbolic representations only generated more fear of merging with the mother: thus, he retreated into the distancing symbols of the solids. It is ironic that it was his intense love for his mother, the maternal nature, and the female in general that led him to solidify her in verse and symbol. We must, then, read Baudelaire's Les Fleurs Du Mal in the context which he himself recognized as one of ambivalent desire: "Much therefore will be forgiven me because I have loved much--my male, or female reader!" (Intimate 118).

Notes

1. All citations are taken from the prose translation of Baudelaire's text, Baudelaire, by Francis Scarfe, Penquin Books, 1964 or Richard Howard's translation, Les Fleurs du Mal, David R. Godine, 1983.

2. See Introduction to Francis Scarfe's translation, Penquin Books, 1964. Intimate Journals, Trans. Christopher Isherwood, City Lights Books, 1983. Also, Charles Baudelaire, A. E. Carter, Twayne Publishers, 1977, and Baudelaire, The Artist and His World, by George Poulet, The World Publishing Company, 1969. Also, Baudelaire, by Martin Turnell, New Directions, 1953.

3. Biographical evidence suggests Baudelaire maintained a close relationship with his mother yet was very distant with his step-father. His own father died when he was six. Shortly after his mother's marriage to General Aupick, Baudelaire was sent away to school. After his failure there, he was sent on a long sea voyage. While Baudelaire never again lived with his mother, he remained emotionally, and for the most part financially dependent on her the rest of his life. His relationship with her was passionate, turbulent, and intense. His relationship with his step-father remained strained at best. Baudelaire was never able to overcome his hatred for the man. In fact, at one point he threatened to shoot him.

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